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SUBJECT: LATVIAN PRESIDENT ZATLERS MEETS PUTIN - WILL VISIT
MOSCOW FOR VICTORY DAY

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JUDITH GARBER, REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) President Zatlers met Prime Minister Putin in an impromptu encounter with warm atmospherics in Helsinki, February 10. Presidential Chief of Staff Rinkevics briefed the Ambassador on February 11, explaining that no bilateral meeting had been planned at the regional Baltic Sea Action Summit. However, the two leaders began chatting during the Summit "family photo," and a meeting was arranged for a few hours later. Rinkevics described it as the first meeting in which Putin did not harangue Zatlers about Latvia's stance on Georgia, Latvia's ethnic Russian minority, or NATO policies. The focus, instead, was entirely on economic cooperation.

¶2. (C) Putin extended a personal invitation to Zatlers to attend Russian Victory Day celebrations on May 9 celebrating the victory over Nazi Germany 65 years ago. Zatlers accepted, following in the footsteps, Rinkevics stressed, of former Latvian President Vike-Freiberga who had attended the 60th anniversary event in Moscow. Zatlers was immediately criticized by representatives of the nationalist Fatherland and Freedom and right-of-center Civic Union parties for accepting the invitation.

¶3. (C) The two leaders agreed that the bilateral intergovernmental commission would meet in either late spring or early summer, and to work on a date for Russian FM Lavrov to visit Latvia. Rinkevics noted that while Zatlers' previous meetings with President Medvedev had always been constructive, Putin's friendly approach was unusual. He was not sure why Putin had been so positive, but indicated that the Latvian president would seek to build on this constructive meeting, while exercising appropriate skepticism and caution.

GARBER